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ABSTRACT

The main trends in U.S. race relations are assessed from the time of the appearance of Gunnar Myrdal's book "An American Dilemma" in the 1940's and Dorothy Newman's examination of the same theme through 1975. Both authors' perceptions of the racial situation and the problems of inequality are briefly reviewed. Rising educational attainment, improved infant mortality and life expectancy statistics, increased black representation in elected and appointed public positions, and growing black entrepreneurship are mentioned as examples of the improved status of blacks in the past three decades. Black protest, and to a lesser degree white social consciousness, especially in the 1960's, are cited as two factors in the progress made toward equality. Gross inequalities, however, continue to exist in the areas of income, employment, housing and education. The conservative mood of the nation, a faltering economy, and the competition of other minority groups are said to have diverted attention and action away from the social problems of blacks. A revival of the philosophical and moral vision of the 1960's is called for in order to avoid a reversal of the progress that has been made. (GC)

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Black progress:

Achievement, failure, and an uncertain future

by Alan Pifer

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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Black progress: Achievement, failure, and an uncertain future

The measurement of social change in its many aspects is an imprecise art, especially in the realm of attitudes and beliefs. Nevertheless, it is important at this time to try to assess the progress toward racial equality that black Americans have and *have not* made in recent decades, because there is a growing perception among white Americans that black advancement has now become self-sustaining and needs no further impetus or assistance.

Indeed, there are many today who believe that the nation's debt to black people for past injustice has been so fully paid that whites themselves are becoming the victims of reverse discrimination. In their view, few if any inequalities between the races still exist, and those which do can be laid to "deficiencies" in the motivation, character, or intellect of individual blacks.

The spread of these disturbing ideas understandably is increasing fears among blacks that progress has come to a halt and that some of their hard-won gains may be lost. Some blacks think that an era of retrogression has already set in as they contemplate the implications of the *Bakke* case for education and jobs and of other reverse discrimination suits in the field of employment. Everywhere they look they see evidence of white backlash and a retreat from the civil rights convictions of the 1960's.

More than 35 years have elapsed since Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish social scientist, was commissioned by Carnegie Corporation to investigate and record, however painful the story, the condition of the black minority in the United States. His monumental book, entitled *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy*, still stands as a benchmark for assessing progress toward racial equality and the fulfillment of the American creed. Now, another important book on race relations sponsored by the foundation is about to be published. Called *Protest, Politics, and Prosperity: Black Americans*

This essay is the president's annual statement on an issue of current interest. It represents his personal views and, although broadly related to the foundation's interests, does not directly reflect its specific programs.

and White Institutions, 1940–75, it was written by Dorothy Newman and associates,* who were asked to describe changes in the status of blacks over the past three-and-a-half decades and the causes thereof.

Between Myrdal and Newman, then, lies a span of time which should allow us to sketch the main trends in race relations and to see where blacks stand today in this centrally important aspect of the nation's existence. It is a period that witnessed almost unimaginable changes in the world and national scene, including seven presidencies, three wars, a nearly doubled U.S. population, several economic booms and recessions, and enormous social and technological transformations. Not least was the civil rights activism of the 1960's, which so profoundly affected the status and attitudes of blacks that it seems, for many of us, hard to believe what life was like for most black people only a short while ago. In the early 1940's, writes Newman,

> three out of four black Americans still lived in the South, but North or South, virtually the only jobs open to them were the most menial; over half of all black workers were employed in agriculture or personal service. How much education a black man or woman might have meant little; skilled jobs involving contact with white workers were simply not available. Such jobs as blacks could get paid scarcely human wages: long days at stoop labor sometimes brought $3.00 or less a week, sunup to sundown; domestic work little more. Black children went to schools that were open fewer days each year (to free them up for field work during picking seasons), and black adults could still expect to be beaten or fired from their jobs for attempting to register to vote. Ordinary life was conditioned by discrimination: separate parks, separate water fountains, separate sections of the bus or train. One wartime munitions factory in St. Louis went so far as to build a separate factory for black workers; elsewhere, places that did hire black secretaries or clerks hid them behind partitions.
>
> "No colored need apply." "Whites only." "Negroes served in back." America had its own version of apartheid in those days. In the South the signs were everywhere and a matter of law; in the North they were not common except in want ads, and a matter of custom rather than law, but the effect was similar. Black and white everywhere shared the same geographical space while living in different worlds. Black accident victims would bleed to death before white hospitals would treat them. White restaurants would serve German prisoners-of-war inside, while black American soldiers were made to stay, unfed, outside. . . . To be black was tantamount to being marked for victimization. It is little wonder that black people were more often disabled, more often sick, more often dead in what should have been the prime of life.

* *Nancy J. Amidei, Barbara L. Carter, Dawn Day, William J. Kruvant, Jack S. Russell.*

These were the conditions that Gunnar Myrdal also discovered and chronicled, in the years between 1938 and 1942. But more than simply describing what he found, he probed deeper to uncover the sociological, psychological, economic, and political causes. He illuminated every nook and cranny of what he called "the Negro problem," noting ironically that, "When we say there is a Negro *problem* in America, what we mean is that Americans are worried about it."

Our great national dilemma, wrote Myrdal, was the stark contradiction between our fundamental beliefs as a people in freedom, equality, and justice, and the actuality of society's treatment of the Negro. So indefensible was this contradiction that it constituted a gigantic flaw in the fabric of American democracy, a flaw which Myrdal predicted would become ever more insupportable to the conscience of the white majority and lead inevitably to improvement in the lot of black people. Thus, he saw the slow movement toward equality as inexorable and the moral conscience of whites as the driving wheel of change.

While Newman's book, with the advantage of hindsight, contends that black protest, rather than white guilt, provided the main catalyst for change, there can be no dispute that the country has made great strides toward an equalitarian society. In the area of constitutional rights, blacks can now vote without legal impediment, equal access to public accommodations is guaranteed, and discrimination in employment and education is illegal. Indeed, the entire, elaborate panoply of legalized discrimination has been swept away.

Few would disagree that it is in educational attainment that blacks have made their most impressive gains. In 1940 the proportion of blacks completing high school was only 7.3 percent; today 75.3 percent of black youngsters complete high school, lower than the rate of 85.1 percent for whites but still a spectacular improvement. Blacks are now taking part in post-secondary education in vastly increasing numbers. In 1940 total black enrollment was less than 50,000, over 95 percent of it in the traditionally Negro colleges. By 1976 the number of blacks in colleges and universities had risen dramatically, to 1,062,000, including part-time enrollment. Although enrollment at the graduate-level and in graduate professional schools remains low compared with white enrollment, more and more blacks are completing advanced training and are making their way into the managerial, professional, and technical ranks of the labor force.

We have also seen tremendous improvement in other key aspects of life for black Americans. For example, the infant mortality rate for non-white persons (mainly blacks) dropped from 74 per thousand live births to 25 between 1940 and 1974—still, of course, appreciably above the 15 per thousand rate for whites. Life expectancy for blacks and other minorities at birth increased from 63 to 66, and maternal death in childbirth decreased from

7.7 per thousand live births to 3.2. Blacks, too, are experiencing improved access to justice in the courts, and we see black elected officials sitting in both houses of Congress, in state legislatures, on city councils, on school boards, and as members of other official bodies. We see them as mayors of some of the nation's largest cities, as members of the Cabinet, and representing us at the United Nations. Moreover, the power of the black vote was felt as never before in the last presidential election.

Minority entrepreneurship has grown from essentially a few family stores, mostly in rural communities in the South, to the point in 1976 where the 100 largest black companies recorded gross sales of $775 million from such enterprises as insurance, magazine and music publishing, electronics manufacturing and auto sales and service. Black families are living in formerly all-white suburbs and attending previou.'y all-white schools. There is wide integration in sports, entertainment, and the arts.

Such accomplishments and the desire of American blacks to recognize and take pride in their heritage undoubtedly account for the rising respect accorded blacks by whites and for the greater self-confidence and sense of efficacy felt by blacks themselves.

To the casual observer, then, the "Negro problem" would seem to have disappeared, since blacks, apparently, no longer suffer discrimination or other ext.rnal barriers to advancement in American society. The gains they make fro.n here on would appear to be strictly up to them.

While there has indeed been a vast social transformation of American life, most of it taking place during the past 15 years, it is impossible to speak of it without uttering a distinct *but*. Progress for blacks yes, but also extensive failure measured against the nation's highest ideals and against the national self-inte.est. Scrutiny of field after field reveals that blacks are still materially much worse off than whites, that racial prejudice and discrimination are still pervasive, and that new, more subtle barriers to further progress are being erected. The disparities are illustrated most graphically in the income of blacks, in their employment opportunities, in their housing, and in the quality of their educational experience. We have come some distance along the road to a just society, but we are far, far from the goal of true racial equality. On the contrary, there is the danger that we might turn back, unless we can find new reserves of energy and new strategies to sustain the momentum for change.

Income

Nowhere is evidence of the continued inequality between blacks and whites more obvious than it is in regard to income. Since 1940 the standard of living for most Americans has risen markedly, and both races have in the aggregate made real economic gains. What would have been considered luxuries three or four decades ago are today classed as necessities by both

white and black families. Even so, the relative position of the masses of blacks has scarcely improved. From 1947 to 1975 the ratio of income earned by blacks to that earned by whites narrowed by only 11 points, from 51 to 62 percent. Today the average earnings of black families have receded to only 59 percent that of whites.

The economic situation of the black poor has clearly deteriorated—not only relative to that of whites but to that of the growing black middle class. There are indications that the movement of blacks from lower-paying into higher-paying jobs has slowed considerably during the 1970's. The steady decrease between 1959 and 1968 in the proportion of black families of low income came to a halt in 1969 and has not improved since then. In fact, blacks, while accounting for only 11 percent of the population in 1974, constituted one-third of all Americans living below the official "poverty line" of just over $5,000 for a non-farm family of four. The proportion of poor families headed by a black woman increased markedly in the early 1970's, and by 1975 three-quarters of these families were receiving some or all of their income from public assistance. In total, four out of ten black children were being raised in poverty in that year, while only one out of ten white children was classified as poor. The situation today would not be appreciably different.

One would suppose that the greater economic vulnerability of blacks during the 1940–77 period qualified them to benefit proportionately from such public income transfer programs as social security, unemployment compensation, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and food stamps. However, this has not been the case. Although 95 percent of the aged who were white received social security benefits in 1975, only 87 percent of elderly blacks qualified. In 1976 only 67 percent of black and other non-white workers were covered by unemployment insurance as against 74 percent of whites. In 1973 the average monthly benefit of retired non-white workers was just 80 percent that of whites. One reason for these differences of course is that many blacks have had to take jobs that are "off the books," such as domestic work, and the wages earned are not reported for social security or tax purposes.

Jobs

During World War II blacks and other minorities made great gains in employment. Since 1948, however, their unemployment rate has been consistently worse than that of whites. In 1958 minority unemployment was 12.6 percent, and it remained over 10 percent until the Vietnam war. Even in the mid-sixties the rate was 7.4 percent while that of whites fell to under 4 percent. Black unemployment since 1975 has fluctuated between 12 and 14 percent. In November 1977 it was 13.8 percent.

While it is clear that blacks have made substantial gains during boom periods, especially those associated with war efforts, it is equally clear that

they have lost more heavily during economic recessions. In the labor market they were, until quite recently, virtually excluded from the manufacturing and building trades. Occupational segregation, *de facto* job ceilings, discrimination in hiring, and lack of job seniority have continued to limit employment opportunities for them. Blacks are still found disproportionately in the dirtiest, least desirable occupations and in the lowest levels of the employment pyramid. And while increasing numbers have made it into craft, technical, and even management jobs, few are in positions of real influence in the power structure of the nation's economy.

It should be apparent from the experience of recent decades that we can never count on the "normal" functioning of the economy to equalize economic opportunity for blacks. Such equality can only come about through full compliance with equal opportunity laws and regulations in employment, the removal of job ceilings, and intensive programs of job training and placement for skilled, desirable jobs—all backed up by a serious commitment by government to full employment.

Even so, measures such as these will probably not solve the chronic problem of jobless black youth. The unemployment rate for black teenagers, officially an alarming 39 percent in November 1977, is in reality very much higher because "discouraged workers" are not counted. Poorly educated, untrained, heavily concentrated in urban slums, and ostensibly ill-suited for steady employment, the several hundred thousand youngsters who make up this group are an alienated, crime-prone element in our communities. Today the unemployment rate for black youth is two-and-a-half times that for white youth, and their labor force participation is only 75 percent that of whites.

The reasons for this upsurge in unemployment among black youth are varied and complex. During a slowing economy job opportunities have not been commensurate with the rising educational level of blacks, so that young people with a high school credential no longer necessarily "qualify" for entry into skilled occupations. Many low-level jobs traditionally available to blacks are now disdained by those who feel they deserve more from their education and whose self-image will not permit them to do what they regard as menial labor. For their part, employers, compelled to pay a rising minimum wage, may be reluctant to hire young people with low skills—especially if they are black. Moreover, young blacks who in the 1960's benefitted from targeted, federally-financed training and employment programs, even though these programs did not always lead to permanent employment, have received much less attention in the 1970's. In recent years neither government nor industry has been responding effectively to their needs.

Beyond these factors, however, some serious structural problems have developed that have simply eliminated many jobs for which blacks of all ages might otherwise have qualified. These include the rapid growth of highly

competitive, labor-intensive industries in other countries (for example in the needle trades and in the electronics field), the migration of industry from inner cities to suburbs that are inaccessible by public transportation, and the introduction of new technologies that have reduced the need for labor in both manufacturing and service industries.

Looking down the road, it seems likely that the problem of unemployment among young blacks will, if anything, get worse rather than better, thereby further diminishing the already slim prospect these young people have of making a successful transition from youth to a productive adulthood.

Housing

Directly related to the economic disadvantage suffered by blacks is their poor housing. Three-fifths of all blacks inhabit the declining centers of large cities, crowded into decaying structures that frequently lack adequate heat and sanitary facilities. Often these homes are far distant from the places where jobs are now to be found.

It is true that some black families have been able, with the help of fair-housing provisions of the 1968 Civil Rights Act, to break the color bar in previously all-white suburbs, but the numbers involved are relatively small. The majority of blacks still live in run-down, segregated inner cities, because this is the best they can afford and because of fierce opposition to low-income housing projects by residents of the suburbs. Furthermore, the denial of mortgage money and insurance protection for homes and small businesses in "declining" areas—known as "redlining," or more euphemistically "geographic disinvestment"—has helped cause the rapid deterioration and eventually the virtual destruction of some neighborhoods heavily populated by blacks.

At least 80 percent of all American families today live in segregated neighborhoods, white or black. *De facto*, the United States is still two nations.

Effectiveness of schools in promoting equality

From roughly 1960 onwards much attention has been focused on the fact that black pupils generally perform less well in school than do whites, as measured by classroom performance, scores on standardized aptitude and achievement tests, and years of school completed. The rationale behind some of the Great Society programs of the mid-sixties was that the poorer school performance and lower educational attainment of blacks largely accounted for their depressed socio-economic position in adult life.

In a new book sponsored by the Carnegie Council on Children, called *Minority Education and Caste: The American System in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, John Ogbu, a Nigerian social anthropologist who has done many years of research in this country, examines the phenomenon of black school failure and reviews various theories advanced in recent years to explain it. One

theory held that black children suffered from "cultural deprivation" in their home backgrounds. Another theory held that the conflict between the dominant white, middle-class culture of the public schools and the different culture of the black world, with its own values and even its own dialect, produced severe learning handicaps for the black child. A third theory emphasized the notion of institutional deficiency—that in myriad ways schools are organized to favor white, middle-class children at the expense of black children. Examples cited were hostile attitudes of white teachers, their insensitivity toward black children and their expectations that they would fail, educational "tracking," over-dependence on standardized tests in which blacks do poorly, and so on. A fourth theory put blame on the failure of the schools to ensure meaningful educational equality by instituting effective remedial programs to counteract the negative influences of home and community. A final, highly controversial and generally discredited theory attributed the lower school performance of black children to their allegedly inferior genetic capacity to learn certain kinds of cognitive skills.

Ogbu then examined the two principal strategies employed since the early sixties to overcome black school failure: compensatory programs, such as Head Start and Title I, and school integration. Although he agreed that both these strategies are justified because they serve important moral and social objectives, neither, he found, has been particularly successful in equalizing black school performance. The reason is that, like the theories on which they rest, they focus their attention on what are essentially symptoms of the pathology of black failure rather than on its root cause. This root cause, which lies not in black but in white America, is the systematic relegation of blacks over many centuries to an inferior, caste-like status in our national life, with devastating consequences for their motivation and skills.

Ogbu argues that blacks occupy inferior social and occupational positions in society not because they lack educational qualifications for anything higher. Rather, he says, they are in this situation because the institutions of society exclude them by a system of racial stratification that virtually assures their low status in adult life. The evidence is abundant, he goes on, that blacks with the requisite education and credentials do not have access to occupational and social roles commensurate with their abilities. And as long as this remains the case, black progress will be thwarted.

One must, however, introduce two qualifying comments to Ogbu's thesis—generally persuasive as it is. First, although the hope of later success in the labor market is clearly important to the stimulation of educational motivation, we cannot deny that the quality of education available is also relevant. We know that many blacks, when they have been exposed to good schools, whether segregated or integrated, have become highly motivated and have performed well in their studies, completing high school and going on to college.

Second, while it is true there is no body of convincing evidence to indicate that school integration improves the educational performance of black children, it must be recognized that a large proportion of black youngsters still attend schools that are not integrated. In fact, real integration is still very much more a hope (or fear) than a reality in most areas of the country because of the almost irresistible impact of residential segregation. We simply do not know, therefore, what the effect of true integration, practiced over several generations, would be on the school performance of black children. Certainly, in these circumstances, it would seem that a total discounting of the *educational* value of integration to blacks is premature.

An uncertain future

Whether one attributes the perpetuation of racial inequality to caste or class barriers, or elements of both, most observers agree that the problem at times seems almost intractable. Active white resistance, lack of the political commitment and will to break up these barriers, the self-interest of those who benefit disproportionately from the *status quo*, all combine to continue the lag between promise and reality. The rise of increasing numbers of blacks to the social, economic, and political ranks of the middle class does not change this dismal fact. What improvement there has been in the status of most black people has, as Ogbu points out, taken place only in times of national crisis, when their labor has been in demand, or in direct response to the civil rights initiatives of blacks and their white supporters. Obviously, we cannot rely on national crises to make the difference. Thus, the most effective course, in Ogbu's view, is pressure by blacks for priorities and preferential treatment as a compensation for generations of discrimination and exclusion. Such pressure "will have to increase before the white power structure will design and implement a comprehensive policy for total elimination of the caste barriers. . . ."

Taking a similar position in *Protest, Politics, and Prosperity*, Dorothy Newman and her associates conclude without hesitation that "the cutting edge" of progress for black Americans has been black protest. They write:

> Our findings are unequivocal that vigilant, aggressive protest is necessary at all times . . . to maintain gains, to prevent losses, and to make progress. The gains by black Americans since 1940 have been truly theirs, with relatively few champions who have spent a lifetime in their struggle. If "the Lord helps those who help themselves," black Americans would long since have achieved equality with white Americans. Intense effort has been an integral part of their lives. That even so persistent and creative an effort has not yet achieved its goal is testimony to the power and influence of the white majority. This is not only because of their wealth, or because of the ordinary restrictions societies impose on minorities; it is also because black and

> white minorities still live out their lives in separate social worlds. . . . The separate social worlds of black and white Americans is only one manifestation of how racism has become institutionalized in America. We have seen how blacks are denied employment regardless of merit; denied housing regardless of credit worthiness; and receive less from income security systems regardless of characteristics similar to white fellow citizens. Institutionalized racism, that which is built into organizations' ways of proceeding, eases the burden of personal guilt, and so is readily perpetuated.
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> Our predominantly white institutions—public and private—and the individuals in them do not take it on themselves to remove barriers or to act forcefully on behalf of black Americans without pressure being brought to bear. The managing white world continues to be ingenious in finding ways to resist change even under the restraints of law. Only persistent protest, using equally ingenious ways of carrying on the struggle, has been an equally powerful way of meeting and overcoming that resistance.

As we have seen, Gunnar Myrdal, writing nearly four decades ago, predicted great changes in the relationship between blacks and whites in the United States, based on his belief that the conflict between the nation's highest ideals and its daily practices would become so insupportable to the conscience of whites that change would be inevitable. He did not rule out the significance of black protest, but he assigned it a lesser role in the generation of black progress. While not entirely dismissing the importance of white conscience, Dorothy Newman *et al* are firm in their belief that black protest has been the prime mover of change.

Looking back over the years since 1940, one can find much to agree with in the conclusions of Myrdal, Newman, and Ogbu. Although they differ in their emphases on the roots of social inequality between blacks and whites and in the reasons for the gains blacks *have* made in their struggle for full participation in society, their messages are not necessarily antithetical. On balance, the idea that black protest has been the single most important element in black progress seems valid. Certainly this was the case in the 1960's when the emotions stirred by the inspiration of Martin Luther King, Jr., and other leaders, by student protest, by the rise of "black power," and, one must admit, by urban rioting, caused white America to make major concessions to blacks in meeting their claims to equal treatment. Nor can one deny that for more than three centuries blacks were relegated to a caste-like status in this country, leaving an enormous legacy of social wreckage for blacks and whites alike that will take many more decades fully to clear up.

At the same time, one cannot discount the role of white conscience as a force for change. While it is true that institutionalized racism served to ease the burden of personal guilt, many white Americans felt deep qualms of conscience over the historic wrong done to blacks and supported public and

private action to compensate. The leadership of President Johnson in transforming the principles of the civil rights movement into national law was centrally important, and this accomplishment can never be denied him.

In the past few years, however, we seem to have arrived at a moment in our history when both protest and conscience are dormant. True, the voices of some black leaders have been raised sharply against the disgracefully high unemployment rate of blacks. True, some whites have maintained their concern about racial injustice. Nonetheless, there seems to be no one today, black or white, capable of evoking anew the nation's latent sense of conscience and mobilizing it into action.

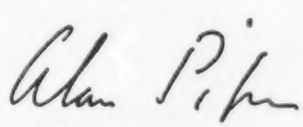
The reasons for this are difficult to pinpoint. Certainly, we have had two administrations that assigned black progress a low priority, and we have one now whose effectiveness in promoting the interests of blacks has yet to be demonstrated. Furthermore, a certain complacency may have set in in the leadership group of the black community after the dramatic gains of the 1960's. The folly of such a relaxation of vigilance has come home to them as they confront the possibility that some of the hard-won opportunities now open to blacks in the all-important fields of employment and education may soon be restricted.

Another reason for the let-up in pressure may be the phenomenon of increasing class differentiation among blacks, as those who have broken through the barriers and gained a foothold on the ladder of success find their interests diverging from those they have left behind. A faltering economy, of course, has always heavily penalized those on the margins of power and affluence, where blacks are to be found in disproportionate numbers. Furthermore, whereas blacks had the almost exclusive attention of the nation's conscience in the 1960's, other groups—the Spanish-speaking and Native American minorities, women, children, the elderly and the handicapped—are now competing for a share of that attention.

Most important, it must be recognized that many of the gains made by blacks in the 1960's were in securing things that whites already had, such as voting rights, access to public accommodations and educational opportunity, and hence did not come at the *expense* of whites. Today, however, the advances being sought by blacks are of a kind that, given the nation's conservative mood and a sluggish economy, put them in direct competition with whites. For this reason it may well be fruitless for black leaders to continue to make their appeal to white conscience on racial grounds alone. Rather, they should be putting their effort into building a broad coalition of all who have interests in common—those who suffer from discrimination, poverty, unemployment, poor housing, poor education, and inadequate health care—and seeking gains for blacks within this context. The success of this approach will then depend as much on the amount of political and organizational power such a coalition can generate as on the stirring of the nation's conscience.

In spite of the many uncertainties of the moment, there do seem to be grounds for cautious optimism. The very fact that the nation has come as far as it has in the past decades is astounding. The fact that discrimination, despite frequent circumventions of the law, is illegal has created a solid basis for further progress. And, it is a source of hope that there are ever greater numbers of well-educated, confident black citizens, for it is from this group that a cadre of able black leaders is emerging, visible in every sphere of our national life but especially in political office.

What we must now revive and bring up-to-date is the philosophical and moral vision of the 1960's, and the practical recognition that it is in our national self-interest to convert this vision into reality. We must hope that an observer, writing as many years in the future as Gunnar Myrdal wrote in the past, will be able to record that the United States of this day committed itself unreservedly to true racial equality and hence to the realization of its highest ideals. If that should happen, then Myrdal's classic "American dilemma" will at long last have been solved.



President